

THE MAYOR'S CHARTER SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT #12

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City of
Indianapolis
Bart Peterson, Mayor



The Mayor grants charters to school operators offering them full autonomy in exchange for a high level of accountability. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), the Mayor's Office developed a model accountability system through which the schools and the Mayor's Office establish expectations, monitor progress, report to the public, and make informed decisions about the future of the schools.

Indiana's charter schools law and the state's accountability policies set the broad context within which the Mayor's accountability system falls. These important state requirements include annual fall student ISTEP+ testing and reporting. The Mayor's approach to accountability extends beyond that of the state, with the aim of providing additional

practical benefits to charter schools, families, and the public. To measure student progress over the course of the year, Mayor-sponsored charter schools annually participate in an additional fall and spring assessment. The Mayor's Office also collects information about the schools' performance through in-depth third-party site visits, surveys of parents and teachers, and reviews of schools' governance and financial performance. These various evaluative pieces create a fundamentally new kind of relationship among public schools, the agencies that oversee them, families, and the larger public.

To achieve this goal, the Mayor's Office designed an accountability system for charter schools based on the following basic principles:

- **Autonomy** – enabling schools to implement their own unique approaches to quality public education;
- **Value** – providing schools with tools and information that help them improve performance;
- **Low burden** – minimizing the amount of time, effort, and expense needed to comply with requirements;
- **Transparency** – providing maximum information to parents, the schools, and the public about school performance and the accountability process; and
- **Responsibility** – ensuring that the Mayor has sufficient information to carry out his responsibilities for overseeing charter schools that are of the highest quality, accessible to all, and in compliance with all applicable laws.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

The Mayor's Office is committed to implementing a charter school oversight system that is clear from the outset and helpful to all schools in continuously improving. An essential tool for this oversight system, to be used by both the Mayor's Office and the schools, is the Charter School Performance Framework.

This Framework serves two important purposes: (1) to inform ongoing oversight by the Mayor's Office and (2) to help each school in continually assessing and improving its performance. The Framework provides a foundation of common evaluation elements for all of the Mayor's charter schools. The content of

this Framework serves as a *floor* rather than a ceiling for school performance and continuous improvement. It is expected that each school will develop and enrich this basic accountability plan with additional measures to assess and demonstrate achievement of its specific mission.

COMMON MEASURES: THE CHARTER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

The Charter School Performance Framework is divided into four sections:

- **Is the educational program a success?**
- **Is the organization effective and well-run?**
- **Is the school meeting its operational and access obligations?**
- **Is the school providing the appropriate conditions for success?**

When measuring a given school's performance, the school leadership and the Mayor's Office will examine several sub-questions in relation to each of the four core questions. The four sections and their respective sub-questions will be rated on a four-point scale (*Does Not Meet Standard*, *Approaching Standard*, *Meets*

Standard, and *Exceeds Standard*). For a detailed description of the Framework and the full assessment rubric (and sub-questions) for each section, go to <http://www.indygov.org/eGov/Mayor/Education/Charter/Accountability/2005/home.htm>.

Measuring a school's academic progress is the most important and complex part of this Framework. The Mayor's Office has attempted to create a set of indicators that will capture each school's: 1) **absolute performance** (the percentage of students that are "proficient" in a given subject); 2) **improvement over time** (the academic growth of individual students over time); and 3) **comparative performance** (how well a given school performed relative to other local public educational options).

In making renewal and revocation decisions, the Mayor's Office will focus first on each school's objectively measurable performance outcomes under the first three questions in the Framework. The fourth question in the Framework will serve to inform the Mayor's Office about whether or not the school is on the right path to meet the outcomes expected under the first three questions. More importantly, well before the renewal decision, school self-assessments and external reviews of school academics, finances, and other reporting requirements organized under this Framework will provide solid data that should inform parents' decisions about sending their children to the charter school and each school's continuous improvement efforts.

UNIQUE MEASURES: GOALS ESTABLISHED BY THE SCHOOL

While the Framework is meant to form the foundation of each school's accountability plan, each school identifies additional customized mission-specific goals and objectives by which to measure its performance. An expert in school accountability works with each school to develop goals and measures specific to the school's particular mission and target population. The school accountability plans build on the goals and contractual obligations described in each founding group's charter school agreement and are meant to guide each school's progress

through its first seven-year charter. The Mayor's Office developed an accountability handbook to assist charter founders in building their accountability plans. For more information about the accountability plans, refer to the *Accountability Handbook for Mayor-Sponsored Charter Schools*, which may be accessed on-line. (See the box on page 3 of this report for more information.)

The accountability plan serves as part of a school improvement process and will help each school to:

- establish a clear set of ambitious, attainable, and measurable goals for the entire school community;
- evaluate school performance within a framework that includes student performance, financial, compliance, and organizational data;
- identify its strengths and weaknesses;
- engage parents in the mission and goals of the school as well as help inform their school selection process; and
- demonstrate public accountability for results by creating a transparent set of objectives and measures.

GATHERING THE DATA

The Mayor's Office collects data in a wide range of ways to support the measures of school performance outlined in the Framework. While it will rely on a panoply of reports and statistical information available about schools, the accountability system also includes alternative ways to track a wide range of indicators of school performance. And, although charter schools are free from many restrictions, they still have to comply with basic public school laws and regulations on issues ranging from financial probity to special education, and they must file numerous reports with the state and the Mayor's Office. Consequently, the Mayor's Office devoted significant resources through AECF's support to developing systems to monitor schools' compliance and help them meet their compliance requirements. The charter schools themselves are ultimately responsible for complying with all applicable laws and regulations.

Prior actions

Each school's charter outlines a series of steps, called "prior actions," that must be completed before a school may provide instruction to students. Prior actions include but are not limited to: fully preparing facilities, including obtaining necessary permits and successfully completing inspections; developing

detailed plans for special education, curriculum, transportation, and school safety that comply with all applicable laws; and finalizing budgets, financial plans, and accounting procedures that are in accordance with state rules. To view a list of the prior actions set by the Mayor's Office, refer to the attachments to the charter agreement; the charter and its attachments may be accessed on-line. (See the box on page 3 of this report for more information.)

Pre-opening checklist and visits

Mayor's Office staff conducts visits with each new school before it opens its doors for the first time to students and families. The purpose of these visits is to determine whether the school is focusing on a wide range of matters, from safety to staffing, that are critical for a new school to address successfully prior to opening. The Mayor's Office provides schools with a detailed checklist prior to the visits, and during each visit the Mayor's Office reviews documentation and other evidence that items on the checklist have been satisfactorily addressed. A sample of the pre-opening checklist may be accessed on-line. (See the box on page 3 of this report for more information.)

Annual testing

Each school must conduct standardized

tests of reading and mathematics for every student, every year. To meet state requirements, schools are required to administer ISTEP+ every fall to students in grades 3-10. The Mayor's Office has an additional requirement that students be tested in the fall and spring in order to collect comparable, longitudinal data to measure student growth over the course of each school year and from year to year. This consistent year-to-year testing will allow the Mayor's Office to assess the "value-added" by each school—the degree to which the school contributes to the learning of its students. This kind of analysis will in turn prove critical in the Mayor's Office's assessment of school progress.

Site visits

An outside group of experts periodically visits each Mayor-sponsored school throughout the seven-year term of the charter. The site visits give reviewers the opportunity to see in person what lies behind the test scores and reports that traditionally form the core of school oversight. Team members talk to Board members, students, teachers, administrators and parents; visit classrooms; and review documents and materials. Reviewers provide verbal reports to the schools at the end of their visits, and provide written comments

citing commendations and areas for improvement. The Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) at the University of Indianapolis developed the site visit process and a representative from CELL who has expertise in school accountability led the site visits for the Mayor's Office in 2004-05. In addition to CELL's accountability expert, the site visit team included experienced public school teachers and administrators. A sample site visit protocol may be accessed on-line. (See the box on this page for more information.)

Surveys

Each spring parents and staff complete surveys that assess their satisfaction with the school's learning climate. Survey items align with the Mayor's Charter School Performance Framework. The Kensington Group developed the survey instrument and analyzed the results for the Mayor's Office. To maintain objectivity, CELL administers the surveys and collects the data for the Mayor's Office. A sample copy of the parent and teacher survey may be accessed on-line. (See the box on this page for more information.)

Governance and financial reviews

The Mayor's Office has developed a *Charter School Governance and Compliance Handbook* with guidelines to determine whether schools are in compliance with

their charters and all applicable laws. To help schools maintain and organize all compliance related items, the Mayor's Office works with each charter school prior to opening to create a compliance binder to organize all governance and compliance related documents. In addition, the Mayor's Office conducts monthly governance and compliance site visits to each school. These reviews focus on issues related to Board leadership, reporting requirements, financial management, personnel matters, and school policies. On a quarterly schedule, schools submit financial statements to the Mayor's Office. An independent accounting firm reviews these reports using metrics designed specifically to evaluate the financial condition of Mayor-sponsored charter schools.

Mid-charter review

In the fourth year of each school's seven-year charter term, the Mayor's Office will prepare a comprehensive review of the school's performance to that point. This review will begin in the school's third year with a thorough *self-evaluation* of the school's performance for the first three years of operation, examining all the areas covered in the Performance Framework and any additional measures of success developed by the school. This self-assessment by each school will be combined with a third-party *multi-day on-*

site review to corroborate and build upon the school's self evaluation. A subsequent public report on the school's performance to date will follow. This report will be informed by an array of data collected by the Mayor's Office that includes the annual site visit reports, parent and staff surveys, financial reviews, and reporting information as well as each school's performance data in relation to the school's accountability plan.

ACCOUNTABILITY-RELATED DOCUMENTS DEVELOPED BY THE MAYOR'S OFFICE

- Charter School Accountability Handbook
- Charter School Performance Framework
- The "Charter" - Charter School Agreement
- Pre-Opening Visit Checklist
- Expert Site Visit Review Process and Protocol
- Third Year Self Evaluation and Site Visit Protocol
- Survey of Mayor-Sponsored Charter School Parents and Staff
- Charter School Governance and Compliance Handbook

These documents are available on-line at <http://www.indygov.org/eGov/Mayor/Education/Charter/Accountability/2005/home.htm>.

USING THE DATA

The Mayor's Office publishes the results of all these reviews to inform parents and the greater public about how the Mayor-sponsored charter schools are doing. The Mayor's Office will use this crucial information for making high-stakes decisions about the future of these schools, and the schools can use this information themselves to enhance their educational programs over time.

Informing the public

The Mayor's Office is committed to making its charter school oversight

process as transparent and useful as possible to all parties. The Mayor will continue to produce reports, like this one, that will provide information about how each school is performing, including test score analysis, site visit and survey results, and an analysis of how the school is spending its public dollars. Families and community members can access up-to-date school performance information about each school by accessing the Mayor's charter school website. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in the school's fourth year will serve to provide a

good explanation to the legislature and the general public about how effectively public dollars are being spent.

Informing the Mayor's Office

The Mayor's Office will continuously use the data collected to ensure that schools are on track to fulfilling the terms of their charters, including meeting the common goals outlined for all schools as well as each school's individual goals. Ultimately, the Mayor's Office will utilize all of the data collected over the first six years of the school's charter term to make charter

renewal decisions. In its sixth year, each school must submit a renewal petition that presents the case for why the school should maintain its charter. The Mayor's Office will consider this renewal petition in conjunction with the mid-charter review, the site visit reports, survey results, governance and compliance reviews, academic testing performance, and financial audits to decide whether a school should maintain its charter beyond year seven.

Informing the schools

Schools can utilize the accountability data to improve their academic programs and organizational processes. For example, the site visits generate useful critiques by the expert reviewers about the areas schools should target for improvement as well as the areas in which the schools excel. The reviewers also meet with school leaders at the end of their visits to point out their general observations about how the school is running in every major aspect ranging from student learning and classroom management to staff and financial management. Additionally, the mid-charter review conducted in each

school's fourth year will provide the school with a straightforward understanding of what it will need to improve in the subsequent three years. This review will also give schools and parents of enrolled students adequate notice of any challenges identified and ample opportunity to address them prior to the Mayor's renewal decisions. And, among other uses for the data, the surveys administered annually will help every school understand how its important constituents – parents, teachers, and students – perceive the school as a whole and areas that need to be improved to increase satisfaction.